

Life and death of Monte Melkonian

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Thousands of people died during the Liberation struggle in Mountainous Karabakh. The enemy troops had occupied and controlled up to 60 per cent of Mountainous Karabakh. Voluntary fighters from the Republic of Armenia and from the Diaspora fought side by side with the Armenians living in Mountainous Karabakh against the well-armed Azerbaijani forces. The decisive turnaround in the war occurred with the Shushi-Lachin operation in May 1992. One of the fighters from the Diaspora was Monte Melkonian. He was killed on 12th June 1993 in action in Mountainous Karabakh. Who was this man who even before his death had become a legendary Freedom Fighter?

Monte was born on 25th November 1957 in California. His forefathers came from West Armenia. Especially after the massacres under the rule of Abdul Hamid, Armenians fled to USA and a few started new lives in Fresno. In 1970 Montes parents travelled with their children through Europe, including Turkey. Going back to the home of his ancestors and talking with the Armenians still living there left a deep impression on Monte. At the age of 15, Monte went on a School Exchange to Japan. There he not only learned Japanese but also Martial Arts. From Japan he visited on his own other South East Asian countries. In an interview in 1992 Monte emphasised the influence the Vietnamese Liberation War had on developing his own political views.

After returning to California Monte finished High School and began studying Asian History and Archaeology at the University of Berkeley in San Francisco. He organised an exhibition at the University which also dealt with the Genocide of 1915. After the Turkish Consul lodged a complaint the exhibition had to close which led to protest actions from the students. Monte ended his studies with a paper about the History of Urartu in 1978. Afterwards he went to Iran to work as an English teacher. Later he went on a journey to Iranian Kurdistan with other young Armenians. While he was there he got to know members of the Kurdistan Liberation Movement. At the end of 1978 he went to Beirut. This city had become a centre for the Armenian Revolutionary movement. In early 1980 he joined the "Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia" (ASALA) which had been formed in the middle 70's to break the worldwide silence surrounding the Armenian Genocide and to free Turkish occupied Armenia.

Monte was very much involved in the training of ASALA fighters and participated in the preparations for militant actions of the organisation. In November 1981 he was arrested in Paris with a false passport, but after numerous bomb attacks in Paris the French Government were forced to release him. Monte's return to Lebanon coincided with the Israeli invasion. He and a group of fighters made their way from South Lebanon on foot to Beirut. Monte and his supporters were against senseless terrorist attacks. They found it wrong to send patriotic Armenians to their deaths as Suicide Commandos and harming indiscriminately innocent civilians.

It was clear to Monte who used revolutionary freedom movements from all parts of the world as examples to help direct the Armenian liberation movement, that an organisation without a clear revolutionary military-political strategy would reduce itself to aimless violence. The growing division within ASALA finally, resulted in its splitting up in 1983. In November 1985 Monte was arrested in Paris carrying a false Passport and a weapon. He was sentenced to six years imprisonment and after serving four years was released and went to South Yemen. From there he travelled around Eastern Europe where the fall of Real-Socialism had already begun. After a while he decided to go to Armenia where he was married in 1991. The Armenians in Mountainous Karabakh and Armenia were in a critical situation at the time as the Azerbaijani forces were not only better armed but also outnumbered the Armenian forces. Consequently, Monte joined the struggle for self-determination. Within a very short period he was able to prove his great military and organizational talents and was given the Command of the troops on the front in South East Front. Here, he was able to quickly organize and train an effective military force using weapons captured from the Azerbaijanis. Under his leadership four thousand Armenian fighters succeeded in defending the area around Martuni.

Monte's units also fought in other parts of Mountainous Karabakh. In April 1993 he was part of the military command which planned and implemented the capture of Kelbadjar. Monte ensured that as few civilians as possible were endangered by the fighting and he called for the surrender of encircled Azerbaijani soldiers and guaranteed their safe withdrawal. Monte's was not only an excellent military leader.

As Socialist he cared for the improvement in the economic and social living conditions of the people. In a land with an entrenched patriarchal social structure he was committed to women's emancipation. He regarded the work of the women behind the lines as important as the role of the fighters on the front. With his modesty, courage and determination he won the hearts of the people in Mountainous Karabakh. Monte was a teacher who tried to show by example how the

people could move forward. He gave them courage and hope to overcome their difficult situation.

Monte showed that it is possible to be an intellectual without being elitist and aloof; that one can be a patriot without reverting to primitive Nationalism and Chauvinism; that one can be a soldier without being a militarist. As revolutionary, Monte endeavoured to bridge the contradictions of theory and practice. He disapproved of superficiality and self-importance. Criticism and self-criticism were for Monte essential in order to learn from mistakes. At the age of 36 Monte Melkonian became a martyr and is firmly anchored in the history of the Armenian people. His dream of an independent Armenia where social justice, rule of law and democracy can be taken for granted is not yet reality in present day Armenia. It is the irony of history that the great national hero Antranik Ozanian was prevented from defending Mountainous Karabakh against the Azerbaijani aggression. He was forced into exile and died in 1927 in California; near the place where 32 years later a new hero was born. Monte, a freedom fighter who followed the path of Antranik Ozanian and who fell defending the right for self-determination of Armenians in Mountainous Karabakh.

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